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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Written statement submitted by International Educational Development, Inc., a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 March 1999]

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1. International Educational Development/Humanitarian Law Project, in coalition with the National Network of Civilian Human Rights Organizations "All Rights for All" which encompasses 46 Mexican organizations, wish to express their concerns about the situation of economic, social and cultural rights.

2. In many countries, the steps necessary to progressively arrive at the full enjoyment of the rights recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) have not been taken. Rather, Governments have prioritized the interests of national and transnational capital over the welfare of the general population. In Mexico, for instance, years of structural adjustment policies have aggravated the problems of poverty, marginalization, discrimination and inequality. The budget allocations for health, education and rural development have been consistently reduced, while enormous resources have been channelled into a banking rescue package and the militarization of certain regions.

3. One result of the free-market-economy policies that are currently being pursued in many parts of the world is an increase in the gap between rich and poor. For example, in Mexico, 60 per cent of the country's GNP is used by 8.6 million Mexicans, a mere 10 per cent of the population. Conversely, 10 per cent of the country's annual revenue is shared among 59 million people, or 60 per cent of the population. Official statistics indicate that in 1996 there were 42 million people living below the poverty line in Mexico (46 per cent of the population) and 22 million people live in conditions of extreme poverty.

4. The priority given to macroeconomic indicators has been at the expense of wage levels and conditions of employment. In Mexico, the minimum wage covers less than 40 per cent of the cost of the basic food package, and continues to deteriorate. The Mexican Government has attempted to guarantee workers' buying power through insignificant raises in the minimum wage which are disproportionate to the rising costs of basic foodstuffs: in 1997 the minimum wage was 7.76 pesos (US$ 0.78) and the official cost of the basic food package was set at 36.37 pesos (US$ 3.63); by April 1998, the minimum wage was 30.29 pesos (US$ 3.03) and the basic food package 281.30 pesos (US$ 28.10). This represents a real drop in purchasing power of 48 per cent.

5. The situation of workers has been made worse by policies which, to a greater or lesser extent, have privatized conditions of work, pensions and credit opportunities, thereby freeing the Governments of Member States from the responsibility of intervening when rights are violated. In Mexico, in 1996, three legislative reforms were debated - and adopted one year later - which limit the rights, consecrated in the ICESCR, to social security, housing and adequate labour conditions.

6. Turning to the right to education, there are fundamental problems to overcome regarding insufficient and poor-quality service, low literacy rates for women, and the enormous differences in levels of education which exist between regions. In the State of Michoacán, Mexico, the illiteracy level is 47 per cent higher than the national average (which is 12 per cent, and up to 46 per cent for the indigenous population); in the State of Veracruz it is 54 per cent higher, and in states such as Oaxaca 81 per cent higher.

Within such states, there are zones where illiteracy is four times the national average (Tuxtepec) or 3.6 times (Mixtepec). In Oaxaca, the number of children enrolled in school is 25 per cent less than the national average, and in Michoacán it is 12.5 per cent less.

7. The health and nutrition sectors, like education, have been affected by the policy of reducing the welfare budget. In Mexico, the budget for social programmes, including education and health, was reduced by 29,777 million pesos (US$ 2,977 million) in June 1998. There are important regional disparities in terms of access to medical services. In Chiapas, 80 per cent of the population (over 3 million people) lack access to social services, and of these 450,000 do not have regular access to health services. This situation is reflected in the fact that during 1998, in Chiapas alone, 2,027 cases of malaria were reported. Health problems are compounded by malnutrition. As UNICEF has recognized, Mexico does not have a well-defined strategy to address the problem of malnutrition. In this country 350 people die of starvation each day, the majority of whom are children under five. According to UNICEF, of the 2 million children who are born each year in Mexico, 158,000 die, and 40,000 of these deaths are related to malnutrition.

8. The discrimination that ethnic minorities suffer continues to pose a major obstacle to compliance with the ICESCR. Indigenous people in Mexico are not on an equal footing with the rest of the population in terms of benefiting from basic services provided by the State. Many indigenous communities live in deplorable conditions of poverty with little or no access to social or health services. In this vein, according to official figures, indigenous municipalities comprise 48 per cent of those described as suffering a "high degree of poverty" (although they represent only one third of the municipalities in the country as a whole). Turning to housing, only 32 per cent of predominantly indigenous localities have running water and only 10 per cent have sewage systems. Eight of every 10 indigenous homes do not even have a corrugated iron roof and have only dirt floors. Indigenous women suffer the greatest degree of marginalization, reporting the highest rates of illiteracy, malnutrition and health problems.

9. This situation has developed in spite of the fact that inhabitants in predominantly indigenous localities are the owners of their land and houses. However, as indigenous people lose access to land ownership, as the effects of the reforms to article 27 of the Mexican Constitution become more entrenched, living conditions amongst indigenous communities are poised for a downturn. The reform challenges the communal nature of indigenous lands, engendering an individualistic attitude towards land ownership and providing for communal lands to be acquired commercially. This renders indigenous communities vulnerable to exploitation and further impoverishment as their land, their lifeline, is lost.

10. The problem of displaced persons due to internal and international conflicts continues unabated in many parts of the world. In Mexico, this has reached new proportions in recent years due to the presence of paramilitary groups as part of the low-intensity-war strategy, political persecution, and intimidation and harassment by police and military officers. In the States of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas, the majority of displaced are indigenous people

and campesinos who are currently subsisting in inhumane conditions. In the State of Chiapas alone, approximately 20,000 people have been displaced since the start of the armed conflict.

11. The omissions that characterize official policy towards the displaced become more marked when seen in the context of the military budget for the region. In Chiapas, it is estimated that 200 million pesos (US$ 20 million) are being spent monthly on soldiers' wages. This does not include food, vehicles or weapons. In such conditions, economic, social and cultural rights cannot be said to be respected. The situation in Chiapas is merely symbolic of the human rights violations which are widespread throughout the country.

12. In recognition of the declarations by the Commission on Human Rights reaffirming the universal nature of human rights, and of the deterioration of the economic, social and cultural conditions in which the poorest communities live, we call on the international community to promote concrete reforms to improve the quality of life for the most marginalized of our society.